Movie title, director's name, year of production, length (minutes)

**Zhang Yuan 张 元 Mama 妈妈 1991 (90 minutes)**

*Mama* was one of the earliest, if not the earliest, independent fictional feature film in China. It uses techniques associated with documentary realism to represent the hardships of marginalised people. Zhang Yuan’s directorial debut, it marked, together with the films of Wang Xiaoshuai王小帅and Jia Zhangke贾樟柯, the rise of the so-called Sixth Generation of filmmakers. Shot mostly in the surroundings of Zhang Yuan’s own sparsely decorated Beijing flat, *Mama* is a remarkably sensuous tribute to the relationship between Liang Dan梁丹and her educationally challenged child, Dongdong冬冬. It draws our attention to the lack of social support available to the disadvantaged and socially marginalized, and the resulting strain on family relationships. The absent father, working away, barely contributes to family life or decisions involving his child. Viewers, both Chinese and non-Chinese, are challenged by the physical intimacy of mother and son as she coos gently and massages him, while wrapping her child in long white bandages to prevent his epileptic fits – or contemplates abandoning or murdering him. Deeply disturbing at many levels, and for many reasons, this film took two years to overcome a temporary ban.

Synopsis/plot

Dongdong’s natural development was affected by a childhood accident that seems also to have resulted in epilepsy. He doesn’t speak and responds very little to stimuli beyond the occasional pleasure he finds in the physical indulgences of food, massage and peeing in the wrong place at the wrong time. The film lacks any plot except what unravels as Liang persistently rejects the option of giving up on her disabled child and allowing him to be taken into state institutional care. The narrative takes us simply through a gruelling sequence of doors closing in Liang’s face as they are expelled from school, and the library where she works, and mother and child end up alone with each other. No one is particularly unkind, but the absence of help, family support or any real sense of entitlement builds to a silent desperation. The most exciting thing that happens is a trip to the family home in the countryside, when we see Dongdong animated by the water, the wind and the animals around. The film ends mysteriously on their way home when Dongdong disappears at the railway station, and Liang, running desperately beside the screaming trains finds him lying between the tracks.

Cinematography and the Medical Humanities themes

In the haunting opening scene of *Mama*,we find Liang and Dongdong in close-up alone together in the shadows of bedtime. Dongdong’s nakedness is caressed by the gentle rhythmic voice of his mother lulling him to sleep, and the camera which follows her wrapping his limbs and body in bright white linen bandages to contain him and restrain him from convulsing. The safety and security of their inner lives, her maternal dedication and the quiet watchfulness of the ever-silent child, contrasts bleakly with the struggle to find appropriate schooling, and the bureaucratic world of work where this relationship just does not fit. The boy sits for hours in the library, and is unresponsive at school, and his prospects do not improve with time. We feel each moment of the achingly long days, which are shot in black and white to draw out the tedium. But the film itself defies boredom. We feel, for example, the tension of the abandoned mother’s sexuality, and how it finds an outlet in maternal devotion, frustration and ultimately suppressed violence. The story of their love and their failure to find a way to survive together is cut with full-colour documentary material relating the experiences and emotions of families in similar situations, demanding that we pay attention to the scale of the human story even as we are drawn into the power of the fictional narrative.

Being disabled in China

In the titles of the documentary, it is stated that there were 10 million disabled people in China at the time of filming, of whom only a few thousand received adequate care. According to official statistics, over 40 percent of people with disabilities are illiterate and 15 million live on less than one dollar a day in the countryside. About 28 percent of children with disabilities should be receiving compulsory basic education but are not.

Dongdong’s father encourages Liang Dan to have another child and start again. During the years of the One-Child Policy, the disability of one’s only child allowed the couple to have a second legal child.

Points for discussion

* The condition of disabled people in China
* In what ways have the disabled been marginalised as if they were lesser human beings?
* The role of documentary film in the depiction of Chinese reality
* Perceptions of disability in China: as magical, or socially useless?
* Inclusion and exclusion
* The maternal/family relationship and responsibilities
* State and citizenship: what are the state’s responsibilities?
* How does Zhang Yuan’s film figure in the changing nature of Chinese documentaries?
* How does the film depict female desperation?

Online resources

<https://www.timeout.com/london/film/mama>

<https://movieo.me/movies/mama-jzkhgv>

<https://www.independentliving.org/docs7/miles200708.html#16>

<https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/china0713_ForUpload.pdf>

<https://www.disabled-world.com/news/asia/china/disability-china.php>